

Chapter 9: A Bargain of Wits and Strategy

Chapter 9, The morning light filtered through the sprawling estate, casting long golden streaks across the polished floors of the manor. Feyre paced her chamber, mind racing as she weighed the risks of her next move. The previous days had taught her that information was just as valuable as a weapon, and if she were to navigate this world of powerful faeries, she needed knowledge. Tamlin's kindness was unpredictable, veering between indulgence and distance, leaving her uncertain of his true intentions. But Lucien—Lucien was different. His sharp tongue and wry humor masked something deeper, and she suspected he might hold the answers she needed.

A knock at her door interrupted her thoughts, and when she opened it, Tamlin stood before her, his posture casual yet unreadable. "You've been cooped up too long," he said. "Come ride with me. I can show you the land." His voice was neutral, but there was something in his expression—an expectation, perhaps. Feyre hesitated before shaking her head. "I think I'll spend the day alone." She could sense his unspoken curiosity, but he did not press her.

Once Tamlin was gone, she slipped through the manor's corridors, her steps measured as she made her way toward the stables. Lucien was there, strapping on leather vambraces, his expression half-bored, half-amused when he saw her approach. "Finally decided to take me up on my generous offer of friendship?" he drawled, fastening his belt. Feyre crossed her arms. "You're going on patrol. Take me with you." Lucien's auburn brows rose. "And why would I do that?"

She hesitated for only a moment before replying, "Because I need answers. And you seem like the type who enjoys playing games." Lucien's smirk widened, and after a lingering pause, he gestured toward a horse. "Fine. But if you fall behind, I'm leaving you for the wolves."

The woods loomed ahead, vibrant and unspoiled, yet holding an unnatural quiet that set Feyre on edge. Lucien rode beside her, his sharp gaze flicking between the treetops and the shadowed pathways. "These lands weren't always this still," he mused. "The blight is changing things." Feyre's fingers tightened on the reins. "The blight," she echoed. "Tamlin mentioned it. What exactly is it?"

Lucien sighed, as if debating how much to reveal. "It's not just some sickness, if that's what you're hoping. It's—" He cut himself off, then smirked. "Let's just say, it's above your concern, human." His words stung, but she refused to rise to his bait.

The silence stretched, broken only by the distant rustling of unseen creatures. Then Lucien glanced at her, amusement flickering in his russet eye. "Tell me, do humans really think we spend our days stealing babies and dancing in moonlight?" Feyre snorted. "Some of us, maybe. Others believe faeries are little more than monsters with power."

Lucien hummed. "We can be. But we're not all the same."

As they rode deeper into the forest, the air grew heavier, the shadows denser. Lucien slowed his horse, his demeanor shifting. "This is far enough." Feyre frowned. "Afraid of getting lost?"

Lucien ignored the jab, instead fixing her with a calculating look. "If you're looking for a loophole in the Treaty, you won't find one. You belong here now."

The words settled heavily in her chest, more final than she wanted to admit. She had always known escape would be difficult, but hearing it confirmed only made her more determined. Still, she forced herself to appear indifferent. "You talk too much for someone who pretends not to care."

Lucien chuckled. "And you pry too much for someone who shouldn't be asking questions."

They lingered a while longer, their conversation weaving between teasing banter and carefully guarded truths. Feyre absorbed every detail, every scrap of information Lucien let slip, filing it away for later. When they finally turned back toward the manor, she felt no closer to freedom but more aware of the delicate power dynamics at play.

Tamlin was the force that kept this estate standing, but Lucien—Lucien knew its weaknesses. And if she was going to find her way out, she needed to understand both.

This chapter unfolds with a sense of quiet tension, layered with wit, strategy, and subtle power shifts. It paints a vivid picture of a protagonist caught in a realm where knowledge is currency and alliances are built on delicate balances of trust and deception. Feyre may not yet have a clear path forward, but one thing is certain—she is no longer just surviving. She is playing the game.